

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

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Meet the square dancers
redefining tradition

GOVERNOR BUTTIGIEG?
Why Pete could
succeed Whitmer

The Birth of Stand with Trans

How one family's love inspired
a movement for acceptance,
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By Sarah Bricker Hunt

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Roz and Hunter Keith at the Keith family home. Photo: Andrew Potter

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY LIAM CLYMER

Meet the new year with queer joy. Trump's inauguration may be looming, but there's no stronger retaliation than immersing yourself in the events and creations of the LGBTQ+ community. Keep warm while staying active at a queer bowling league, experience a blend of renowned and newcomer musicians at Ann Arbor Folk Fest and head "way down" to Hadestown as it makes a stop in Detroit. And because the winter season lends itself best to cozying up and staying in, why not catch up on some of the best LGBTQ+ streaming you might've missed in 2024?



Jobi Riccio. Photo: Facebook

Come Together for Ann Arbor Folk Fest

Few things build community better than music. Clear communication, especially when expressing complex feelings, helps build bridges of understanding even in challenging conversations with those closest to us. And as attendees are taken on a journey by the diverse voices of the Ann Arbor Folk Fest performers, they're reminded of how music can connect us in ways words alone cannot.

Musical talents range from openly bi emerging folk sensation Jobi Riccio, who masterfully experiments with indie and traditional sounds to create something entirely her own, to the legendary Ketch Secor, the two-time Grammy Award-winning frontman of Old Crow Medicine Show. No matter your tastes, this festival has something for everyone.

Jan. 24-25, 7:30 p.m., Hill Auditorium (825 N. University Ave., Ann Arbor). More information at theark.org/folk-festival.



Feel the Heat of Competition at The Rainbow League

The Rainbow League is a local bowling group that's been operating for over 30 years. But in that time, one thing has remained constant: a dedication to making bowling fun for everyone.

"The league was formed to create community and support for the LGBTQ community and their allies," Rainbow League President Anthany Beasley told BTL. "The goal of our league is to provide community and fun in a safe and affirming environment."

The Rainbow League is part of the United States Bowling Conference (USBC) and the International Gay Bowling Association (IGBO) and follow all-inclusive handicap league rules, meaning folks will have an equitable average that provides for a competitive experience for all levels.

Every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Lodge Lanes (46255 S. Interstate 94 Service Dr., Belleville). Get started at a2bowling.com.



Kevin Bacon. Courtesy photo

Watch the Story of Mark Latunski

Years after the tragic murder of Swartz Creek resident Kevin Bacon in 2019, family members of the murderer Mark Latunski are opening up about how the experience has impacted them. In the new FilmRise documentary, "Mark Latunski | I'm Related to a Killer," Emmy Award-winning gay reporter David Custer lays out the details of the case he covered in depth as it was unraveling. The film juxtaposes this narrative with the relatives of Latunski discussing how the crimes affected them and their families.

Grounded in the emotional impact of those closely affected, this project depicts the danger of crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals with gravity and nuance.

Watch the documentary now on YouTube at bit.ly/4fHDVjD.



The West End production of "Hadestown." Photo: Broadway in Detroit

Revel in the Artistry of 'Hadestown'

Broadway in Detroit welcomes "Hadestown" to the Fisher Theatre stage Jan. 28-Feb. 2. The production, which practically swept the Tony Awards in 2019 and won Best Musical Theater Album in 2020, is worthy of the hype. Audiences are taken through a retelling of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice — but even if you already know how that narrative ends, through the care of singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell and director Rachel Chavkin, plenty is done to make this old myth new.

Full of heart and lyrical mastery, this show engages audience members on what they value most when love and fear are pitted against one another.

Jan. 28-Feb. 2, performance times vary, the Fisher Theatre (3011 W. Grand Blvd., Detroit). Snag tickets at broadwayindetroit.com/events/hadestown.

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Bridget Everett and Jeff Hiller in "Somebody Somewhere." Photo: HBO

Cozy Up With Queer Stories

It's not too late to catch up on the best LGBTQ+ shows and movies of last year. Take a look at some of the stories that stuck with us the most in 2024:

"Arcane" (final season) — Netflix: Stunning visuals and grandiose storylines lead here, but it's the complex interpersonal relationships and satisfying conclusions for these characters that make this season remarkable.

"Sebastian" — Prime Video and Apple TV: Max is a young novelist who begins to moonlight as a sex worker named Sebastian in order to fuel his writings. Throughout this deeply engrossing film, audiences will find themselves rooting for a character that prioritizes ambition over compassion.

"Transmitzvah" — Netflix: Penélope Guerrero is a standout in this dark comedy full of twists and turns that explores the sometimes difficult overlap in gender affirmation and religion.

"Somebody Somewhere" (final season) — Max: In a new year where many of us are seeking community, "Somebody Somewhere" is definitive in showcasing the life-changing impact of found families.

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Attendees enjoy the Affirmations 35th anniversary gala. Photo: Steve Koss

As Affirmations Turns 35, Hope and Dynamic Support Remain at the Center

How the steadfast Ferndale resource has evolved alongside the changing needs of the local queer community

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

On the bustling corner of Nine Mile and Allen Street in the heart of Ferndale, a block from Woodward, sits the cheerful, brightly lit headquarters of Affirmations, a community center and trusted LGBTQ+ resource for more than three decades.

If there's a secret to the long-term success of this local institution, it surely lies somewhere among resilience, love and empowerment.

After the beloved institution marked its 35th anniversary in 2024, its story continues to unfold as a testament to the strength of a community that has weathered many storms and celebrated progress few would have expected at its inception in 1988.

Early days

Before there even was an Affirmations, there was an informal gathering of relatively

inexperienced advocates who just wanted to offer resources to the local LGBTQ+ community at a time when, according to Affirmations' first executive director, Jan Stevenson, there were virtually none.

The first iteration of Affirmations, the Michigan Organization for Human Rights, spun off from the Triangle Foundation, which would later become Equality Michigan, thanks to a \$50,000 grant from the city of Detroit, which funded the project for a year, including a

hotline staffed by volunteers who fielded calls from LGBTQ+ people (mostly gay and lesbian folks) from across the state. While the organization's original founders were ready to close up shop after that first year, volunteers like Stevenson knew how urgently the community needed access to resources — and access to other LGBTQ+ community members.

"It was literally life-changing to be on that hotline," she tells BTL. "It was that core group of volunteers who said, when the

decision was made to not apply for the grant renewal, 'Wait a minute. Have you listened to what we're hearing on these phones? These are people who have no one else to talk to.'"

Stevenson remembers callers who had never said they were gay to any other person before opening up to hotline volunteers. "We could be the first person they'd ever talked to and they were sometimes completely isolated, just freaked out and terrified," she recalls. "And all ages. We were

getting young people, people in their 60s, people who were getting divorced with families. It was life-changing to hear those stories because I felt lucky, even though I'd lost my job. I had a relationship and gay friends and a social network of sorts. It just made sense to give back. When you hear from teenagers, it was hard to think about just stopping that and saying 'That was fun, but we're not going to do that anymore.' Like, what?"

So, as dedicated advocates often do, Stevenson and volunteers like Brian Wooten, Susan Pittman and Christine Puckett made do with what they had. Soon, the hotline was operating out of Wooten's basement laundry room. Before long, the hotline operators recognized a need for in-person meetings and moved the headquarters to Pittman's and Puckett's home in Detroit, where they stayed for about six months. Next up was an office suite in Ferndale.

While the location was erratic in the early years, the need was great. "There was really nothing in terms of social services or even just socialization outside the bars," Stevenson explains. "So almost any group we started was a success because there was nothing else. People were so desperate for an opportunity to meet and to connect and to get support. Basically, this core group of people for the first couple of years, we were each the 'chief cook and bottle washer.' We did it all, from running the organization and doing administrative stuff to facilitating all the groups, recruiting other volunteers, doing events and anything else we could do to keep it going."

By 1990, the group had raised enough funds that it became

feasible to hire an executive director. A hiring decision was made, but the chosen new leader got cold feet at the last minute. Stevenson stepped in "temporarily." She'd recently left her job in banking due to discrimination. "You really couldn't be gay and work in Detroit at that time, especially in the corporate world," she notes. But outside the corporate world, the same wasn't necessarily true. The initial plan was for Stevenson to take on the executive director role for six months.

"Well, six months turned into



Brian Wooten. BTL archive photo

five or six years," she says, laughing. "The whole time was just putting the pieces together, brick by brick, and person by person. But those first initial people were really the heart and soul of getting it going with blood, sweat and tears and money that they didn't have."

"It was a great group and it instilled my joy in people," Stevenson says. "Because that little



Jan Stevenson, center, and Leslie Thompson in 1999. BTL archive photo

group had no reason to be successful. And somehow, we did it, and it was just relying on each other. When one person would get tired and couldn't do

another person would step up. It was just amazing, the level of energy and commitment that the folks put into it just to make it work against all odds, and it was really an inspiring time. We managed to hold it together."

In May 1992, the center's founding story took a devastating turn. Pittman and Puckett were

murdered by their next door neighbor, who "didn't want a lesbian couple living next to him," according to news reports at the time. Instead of allowing this horrific act to silence their community, the activists transformed grief into action, recommitting to the organization's mission and vowing to never forget Pittman and Puckett. Today, Affirmations honors their memories through the Pittman-Puckett Gallery in the main lobby — a testament to resilience in the face of hatred.

After Stevenson stepped down as executive director to focus full-time on Between The Lines, which she and wife Susan Horowitz bought in 1995, the center was run by a board of volunteers for a time before Leslie Thompson took

on the role for 14 years, becoming Affirmations' longest serving executive.

Former executive director Antonio Dave Garcia has felt such a strong connection over the years to Affirmations that after he left his post in 2014 for a position in Los Angeles, he wound up returning in 2019 to the same position — at a time when the organization was struggling financially. It surely would have been easier to send good luck from across the country, but for Garcia, Affirmations' community impact was worth trying to save, even if it meant another cross-country move. "I have seen it save lives, and that's not hyperbole," he explains. "I've seen it save the

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A Queer Collective Is Dancing on Henry Ford's Grave

The unexpected rebellion of queer square dancing

BY BRIDGETTE REDMAN

There was a time when Henry Ford weaponized square dancing to fight the growth of jazz music, which he claimed was a Jewish attempt to subvert wholesome American culture.

The Detroit Square Dance Society is dispelling the specter of the automaker's anti-Semitic racism as they reclaim the fun and joy of the traditional pastime with their Queer Square Dance nights.

"We have subversive intentions and, yes, we want Henry Ford to be rolling over in his grave," said Aaron Jonah Lewis, one of the organizers of the group who plays fiddle while Lindsay McCaw does the calling.

It started in 2014 when they and McCaw moved back to Detroit and started hosting square dances.

"They only started to become queer square dances little by little," Lewis said. "We started using non-gendered language in our dances because we knew that was something that people were wanting — and embracing my queer identity was a big part of that."

The group planned its first fully queer square dancing event in April of 2020, but the pandemic interrupted those plans. Once the cases started dropping in 2021 and people were getting vaccinated, they decided to host a small square dance at the Trash Mountain Collective.

"That was the first time we advertised it as a queer square dance," Lewis said. "We were clear that it was a queer space we were creating. There were people who asked, 'I'm not queer. Is it OK if I come?' I'm like yes, of course, but just know this is a queer space that we're making here."

How is a queer square dance different from what many people were forced to learn during elementary school P.E. classes?

Lewis explains that they use conscious language and create a safe space for people to express themselves.

"We have no tolerance for homophobia," they said.

The caller gathers dancers to explain the positions they need to take on the floor and walks them through the dance moves.

"We don't use the terms 'ladies' or 'gentlemen,'" Lewis said. "We usually use the terms 'lead' and 'follow.' We do a lot of dances where it's not even



The Detroit Square Dance Society. Photo: Andrew Potter

necessary to have a leader."

It's a far cry from when Ford, a well-known anti-Semite, claimed that Jewish people invented jazz to corrupt America. To counteract what he considered the country's moral decay, he hosted square dancing events, forcing his employees to attend. He funded contests and radio shows nationwide, which led to the creation of square dancing clubs and what is now known as Western-style square dancing.

Ford campaigned to make square dancing classes mandatory in school P.E. classes, believing it would teach children good citizenship to learn what he considered "white" and "wholesome" dancing — even though the

call and response of square dancing originated with Black enslaved people.

"Henry Ford was using square dancing as a tool of cultural erasure and forced homogeny, making people do it whether they wanted to or not," Lewis said. "He was saying, 'Look, you all come from different countries. Forget about where you came from. You're American now.'"

The Detroit Square Dancing Society is deliberate about infusing a different philosophy into their events.

"We want to use square dancing as a way to connect people and to celebrate our differences," Lewis said. "We want to have fun and open those doors to the possibilities of connecting

with other kinds of traditions."

The Queer Square Dance nights use a different form of square dancing than what Ford promoted. Instead of Western Square Dancing style, they use the Southern Style Square Dancing.

"Western style is a little bit more regimented," Lewis said. "There are more strict dress codes and gendered roles. It's not as beginner-friendly. You have to learn the dancing before you show up. We're doing Southern Square Dancing, which is more folk-oriented, more grassroots-oriented. It's a lot more free-form. The calls are not at all pre-determined."

Since 2021, they've been hosting four to six



(Top) A Detroit Square Dance Society event. Photo: Andrew Potter. (Bottom) Detroit Square Dance Society musicians. Courtesy photo

dances a year. Their final event in 2024 was held in October at Vamanos in Detroit. Tickets were \$20, but they never turn anyone away who can't afford the price.

It isn't necessary to know anything about square dancing, but Lewis suggests that if you are a beginner to arrive at the start when most of the teaching is done. Dances get more complex as the evening wears on.

"People come out and they have a blast — it's really gratifying to be a part of that," Lewis said. "We don't only do square dances. We do circle dances, long line dances and couple dances. They're all very beginner-friendly."

Most dances last 10 to 15 minutes with short breaks in between each one. While the size of the venue often dictates how many people they can accommodate, Lewis said most dances have anywhere from 80 to 150 people.

The music is always live with Lewis as the fiddle player and band leader. Other musicians include a guitar player, a bass player and various special guests at each event.

Food and drink are always a staple. Guests bring a dish to pass to the potluck events and both alcoholic and non-alcoholic

drinks are available.

"Music, dancing and food are what life is all about," Lewis said, describing what attendees can expect when they arrive. "The room you'll walk into is the room with the food and the bar and people milling around and socializing. You'll see a bunch of fabulous people — and you'll be one of them — greet you and be friendly. In the other room, there will be live music and dancing."

Lewis said she tells people this: dancing is optional, but having fun is mandatory.

"I tell people to bring food, bring comfy shoes, bring friends, bring an open and loving heart and be prepared for a really great time," Lewis said, adding that while they like to say it's for everybody, it really isn't. "It's not for bigots and haters. It's not for anyone who's feeling sick. It's also not for people who don't want to be around people. We totally respect that, but if you are up for being around people, holding hands with strangers, smiling and laughing like an idiot while there's a ripping band playing great music — it's for you."

Visit facebook.com/Detroitssquaredance to stay up to date on upcoming events.

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‘Governor Buttigieg’ Has a Real Ring to It, Amiright?

How strong queer candidates can help Democrats make up lost ground



BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

A new year has arrived and it's brought a most unwelcome guest to the party: new and improved political anxiety and uncertainty. We know what's about to happen here in Michigan — bye, bye state government trifecta — but we don't know exactly what that will mean for the LGBTQ+ community.

Strong voices in the House of Representatives, including Laurie Pohutsky, Jason Hoskins, Jason Morgan, Noah Arbit and Emily Dievendorf, are sure to be countered by fierce resistance by the Michigan GOP, which will lead a slim majority in that chamber. Will typical MAGA infighting keep the fractured Republican party so busy they'll forget to target the LGBTQ+ community with the kind of baseless, cruel legislation that has become law in places like Ohio, where soon, it will be illegal for trans community members to pee in many public restrooms and where gender-affirming care has been outlawed for trans youth? Or will it be open season on our community?

Honestly, it's way too easy to catastrophize on this subject. The what-ifs of it all can become far too consuming and emotionally unhealthy. But hear me out — what if we tried an exercise in whatever the opposite of catastrophizing is? Let's manifest a dream for Michigan in the not-so-distant future that might keep us warm in this latest winter of our collective discontent.

In fact, let's dream a dream where a benevolent, somewhat dorky (but somehow dreamy) pair of queer Michiganders leads us toward bright new horizons...

With Pete Buttigieg and Dana Nessel at the helm, Michigan will finally realize its destiny as the homosexual utopia we've been promised by MAGA candidates for several years now. A cat on every windowsill and four weeks of paid time off each June so we can actually attend all 4,500 Pride festivals across the Great Lake state. Sequined drag queens everywhere. An androgynous, no-holds-barred love fest from Marquette to Ypsilanti. The first First-Gentleman-Married-to-a-Man in state history.

The Buttigieg-as-Michigan-governor scenario doesn't come out of nowhere, by the way. There has been a groundswell of very exciting chatter on this front since Pete appeared on Fox News to counter idiotic MAGA talking points last summer. The AP



Pete Buttigieg, with husband Chasten behind him, greets guests at the White House Pride Picnic in 2024. Photo: Chris Azzopardi

reports that Michigan Democrats are courting the U.S. Transportation Secretary to succeed Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in 2026. Buttigieg has yet to comment beyond noting that he'd wait until after the Biden administration comes to a close.

Anyway, the Buttigieg-Nessel ticket (or the Nessel-Buttigieg ticket; we are cool with both — we just figure Pete can attract more national donations) will offer all of this and more. Remember that time someone invaded Pete's privacy and snapped a thirst trap shot of him minding his own business jogging in Traverse City where he and husband Chasten own a home? Now picture more opportunities for that kind of content, but conveniently located in central mid-Michigan's capital city!

Dana, in her new key role as lieutenant (but again, Gov. Nessel is just fine), will all but assure the rise of feline dominance in Michigan for generations to come. A cat on every pantsuit-adorned lap, thank you very much.

In all seriousness, though, it's clear that Democrats aren't winning elections by playing to the increasingly right-leaning middle — the one all too happy to sit at home and not vote versus listening to the urgent pleas of

Michigan's LGBTQ+ community about what was at stake in the 2024 election. About what's at stake in 2025 and beyond. Candidates who did win are candidates who weren't afraid to say gay. Or lesbian. Or transgender. Voters respond to leaders who embrace and promote their beliefs while firmly advocating for their constituents. Far too many Democrats in this cycle weren't willing to do that for fear of alienating the so-called “middle,” and the result was shockingly low turnout after such an expensive, endless, chaotic campaign that drove every media cycle for months on end.

We know openly queer, vocal candidates can win because Michigan has elected several at this point, including Attorney General Nessel, Senate President Pro Tempore Jeremy Moss, the aforementioned state reps, and dozens of candidates to county and local offices. These candidates not only live their lives out and proud; they campaign on protecting the rights and dignity of the LGBTQ+ community, a completely non-controversial concept that plenty of voters respond to with positivity and enthusiasm. Queer issues aren't typically the centerpieces of these campaigns, but they also aren't wishy-washy, backburner concerns the

candidates are reluctant to address.

These candidates simply speak their truth on the matter without overthinking it. I'm confident they'd do well in a gubernatorial or even a presidential race. The actual middle-of-the-road voter isn't fixated on oppressing LGBTQ+ people and responds well to candidates who own who they are and detail their agenda to make life better in myriad ways for other regular folks. Democratic leaders need to stop playing into the hands of bigoted MAGA candidates who get off on painting us into corners and getting us to focus on responding to baseless, harmful claims instead of focusing on the harms they create and the plans we want to implement. Shut that shit down and get back to business. The end. When we dignify imaginary accusations based on dumb stereotypes, bigots win.

Buttigieg and Nessel (and Moss and so many other candidates) reflect the kind of real Michigan Democratic candidates I want to see more of in upcoming elections, and not just because I'd love to watch the Buttigieg kids grow up in the governor's mansion.

Discovering Janet's Closet: Michigan's Haven for Transgender Shoppers



Inside Janet's Closet. Courtesy photo

BY ANNI ARBOUR



Driving down Fort Street, you cannot miss the boxy, cinder-block building featuring an exterior that still feels like a testament to its first incarnation as a mid-century supermarket, with prominent characteristics recalling its evolution since. The large garage door out front dates back to its transformation into a car dealership and, later, a high-performance engine shop. Its current garish purple paint job glaringly announces its use now as a crossdresser clothing store called Janet's Closet.

The store proudly proclaims its status as the "World's Largest Store for Crossdressers and Transgender Individuals," a claim I did not question upon nervously entering its 15,000-square-foot space. Dresses, tops and bottoms fill the floor space, rack-to-rack, wall-to-wall; wigs, shoes and stockings line the walls. For a niche set of buyers, there's Janet's Dungeon, a connected shop of fetish and BDSM gear and accessories located in the same space.

I had come to shop at Janet's a few months into my gender transition journey. As I began reconfiguring my wardrobe to feminine styles, something quickly became apparent: I was going to have a hell of a time finding clothes that fit.

I am embarrassed to admit to all the money I wasted on ill-fitting clothing in the early days

of my transition. I was blindly guessing at my sizes based on the sketchy "size guides" that usually accompany clothing ads online and vary wildly from seller to seller. Every online store has its own system.

Logically, buying at a brick-and-mortar store where you can try on clothing is undoubtedly a trans person's best option. Getting past your fear and trepidation of shopping in public is going to be your biggest challenge. Which is what led me to Janet's Closet.

A little history: The store is eponymously named for Janet Law, the store's founder and guiding light. In her previous cisgender man life, she was a local drag racing legend. A master mechanic known for building high performance engines, Law opened National Machined Engine in 1982, in the building formerly housing Downriver Dodge.

Law's connections to drag racing date back to the sport's halcyon days at Detroit Dragway in the 1960s and '70s. In 1992, Law became manager of the then-closed venue and restored it to a semblance of its former glory. It was a short-lived renaissance, though, and soon, the fabled location at Sibley and Dix shut down for good.

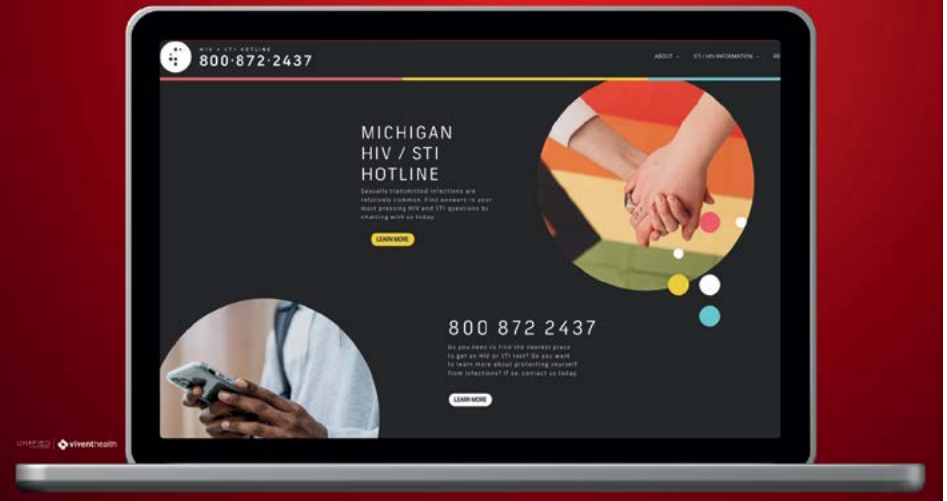
Only a few years previously, Law had wandered into Gigi's, the iconic gay nightclub in Detroit. She had gone there with the purpose of scouting it out as a spot to take a date and check out the drag queen entertainment. She

See *Trans Lucent*, page 24

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One Million Moms Declare War on ‘Wicked’ Because It’s a Little Queer



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

I’m writing this on Jan. 6, 2025, the day Congress is to certify the election of Donald Trump for a second term. Noticeably absent from the United States Capitol? Progressive rioters scaling the building and breaking in for the purpose of shitting on House Speaker Mike Johnson’s desk and attempting to overturn the 2024 election. The fact is, Trump definitely lost in 2020. Unfortunately, he did win in 2024. Because in the United States, we apparently love to let the absolutely worst people run the country.

As we get closer to Trump’s inauguration, it is probably wise to find something pleasant to distract ourselves from another four years of racist fury and misogynist wrath. And what better way to do that than to escape with a good movie? Something like “Wicked,” perhaps?

Now, I have not seen and have no intention of seeing the “Wicked” movie. I did, however, see the musical at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit many years ago. I remember thinking it

We’re going to need all of the joy we can muster in the coming years. So if you want to see ‘Wicked,’ for the first or for the 10th time, do it! Before Christian extremists somehow ban it.

was pretty good. I’m not huge on musicals, so that’s a pretty rousing endorsement from me.

But I recognize that there are a lot of people super hyped about “Wicked” the movie. And like I said, we’re going to need all of the joy we can muster in the coming years. So if you want to see “Wicked,” for the first or for the 10th time, do it! Before Christian extremists somehow ban it.

One Million Moms (OMM), a division of the Christian extremist American Family Association that does not actually include a million moms, has its sights set on the film. OMM

describe themselves as people who are “fed up with the filth many segments of our society, especially the entertainment media, are throwing at our children.”

OMM warns, “‘Wicked’ Not Only Includes Witchcraft But Also LGBTQ Content!”

Yes, a movie about witches contains... witchcraft. Something even OMM admits is pretty obvious.

“The musical contains a tremendous amount of witchcraft and sorcery, and that content prompts most parents to avoid taking their children to see Wicked. But the film also shows not-so-discrete crossdressing and men crushing on men, which parents may not expect,” OMM explains on their website.

“Instead of an uplifting Broadway musical about friendship and family, talents and resources were used to create a dark movie that also pushes wokeness,” they continue. “Universal Pictures has traded its usual subtlety for intentionality.”

Ah, yes, Universal Pictures, the infamously subtle movie company that gave us the likes of “The Fast and the Furious,” “Bridesmaids” and “The 40-Year-Old Virgin.”

So what about “Wicked” is so woke?

Well, for one thing, Cynthia Erivo, who plays Elphaba, identifies as queer in real life and is currently in a relationship with actor Lena Waithe. They seem happy, which no doubt makes OMM furious.

And then there’s apparently a very close connection between the two main characters, Glinda (Ariana Grande) and Elphaba, that many are reading as queer.



“I think [Elphaba] loves Glinda, I think she loves love,” Erivo told The Gay Times. “And I don’t think there’s anything wrong with celebrating the deep connection the both of them have.”

Grande told The Gay Times that Glinda “might be a little in the closet” and calls the relationship between Glinda and Elphaba “a true love...that transcends sexuality.”

Heaven forbid that two people love each other, especially two women who love each other in a way that could (gasp!) be read as queer.

Actor and singer Kristin Chenoweth, who played Glinda alongside Idina Menzel as Elphaba on Broadway and who is an LGBTQ+ ally, is having none of OMM’s hate disguised as pearl-clutching.

“Everyone knows the ‘one million Moms’ are a mere few hundred. Maybe. It’s called entertainment. Artistry,” Chenoweth wrote on Instagram. “All the silliness that these women spew [is] out of hate.”

As a Christian, she says, “I can’t help it: I try to love ‘em anyways,” but admits that “they don’t get it.”

Indeed, they don’t.

OMM claims they are fighting to give children “the best chance possible of living in a moral society.” Unfortunately, they believe it is moral to denigrate LGBTQ+ people and treat any depiction of queer love as if it is equivalent to pornography that will irreparably harm children.

Of course, there are plenty of queer people, kids and adults, who would actually be quite happy if they didn’t have hate directed at them constantly by groups like OMM. Last time I checked the Bible said to love your neighbor. It doesn’t say, “Unless they are queer, then you must dehumanize them and work to make their lives as miserable as possible.” Now that would truly be wicked.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

On His Way Out the Door, Biden Signs First Federal Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation in Decades

In a stark setback for LGBTQ+ rights, President Biden has signed the first federal anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in decades, marking a troubling shift in the national landscape as he prepares to leave office. The \$895 billion Pentagon policy bill, signed Dec. 23, restricts military insurance Tricare from covering gender-affirming care for minors. Biden's subsequent statement strongly condemned the restrictions, warning they would force the Defense Department to violate clinical guidelines and

undermine military recruitment by denying essential healthcare to service members' children. This legislative blow arrives alongside another significant setback: the Department of Education's withdrawal of a proposed Title IX rule that would have protected transgender athletes' right to participate in sports aligned with their gender identity. The rule's withdrawal, coming after more than a year of development, coincides ominously with Trump's imminent return to office in January and his explicit promises to further restrict LGBTQ+ rights. While these developments signal mounting challenges for the LGBTQ+ community, advocacy organizations across Michigan remain committed to providing resources and support in the ongoing fight for equality.



Join the Solidarity Now: Defending Trans and Queer Futures Rally

Inclusive Justice of Michigan will host a rally on Inauguration Day Jan. 20 featuring several key Michigan LGBTQ+ organizations. The Solidarity Now: Defending Trans and Queer Futures Rally will include remarks from Michelle Fox Philips (Gender Identity Network), Roz Keith (Stand with Trans), Emme Zanotti (Equality Michigan), Rev. Dr. Roland Stringfellow (Inclusive Justice) and Grace Bacon (Crossroads). "We are coming together to reject the dangerous anti-trans and anti-queer rhetoric that defined [Trump's] campaign and threatens our lives, our rights and our dignity," promotional materials read. "Together, we will demand action, justice and accountability for the harm caused by spreading propaganda targeting our communities."

The event kicks off at 12 p.m. at the Patrick McNamara Federal Building (477 Michigan Ave., Detroit). RSVP at mobilize.us/mobilize/event/747727.



Remembering Phillip O'Jibway and James Stanley Domanski

Former teacher Phillip O'Jibway, for 25 years the managing editor of Cruise magazine and a founding officer in 1977 of the Michigan Organization for Human Rights, died Jan. 4 in Grant, Florida at 77. Splits in MOHR later formed the basis for both Affirmations Community Center and the Triangle Foundation,

predecessor to Equality Michigan. O'Jibway was also an early member of the pioneering group the Association of Suburban People. Before moving from Metro Detroit six years ago, he was active in the Senior Koffee Klatch at Affirmations. And on Dec. 20, James Stanley Domanski died in Sarasota, Florida at 65. James was a co-owner of Pronto!, a beloved LGBTQ+ venue that he helped transform into a welcoming space central to the community. His passion for making Royal Oak beautiful led him to create "We Dig Royal Oak" and tend gardens at the Detroit Zoo.

Check Out Local Queens at Arcenciel

Head to Arcenciel Jan. 11 for a drag show featuring local talents Victoria Sanchez, Lotipha Hunter, Deija Vaton, Sapphire Shade and Talavera Glaze in support of drag queen Aliya Holmes, an upcoming contestant in the Miss Ohio Gay Pride Pageant. Come for dinner and stick around for the 10 p.m. show, followed by dancing and entertainment from DJ Lipgloss. The show kicks off at 8 p.m. Tickets at bit.ly/3DISaHP.

Find Out What 2025 Has in Store for You

Experience a magical evening — and a potential glimpse into your future — at Boston Tea Room Jan. 24 with private psychic readings, intention setting and drinks. Groove to DJ Sassi Blaque's Pride playlist while drag queens Luna Banx, Artemiss and Eros Lee mingle with guests. Each ticket for the Psychic Self Care Event includes a swag bag with crystals and fortune scrolls, plus 10% off store purchases. Tickets at bit.ly/3CavsYp.

A Trans Spotlight at the Golden Globes

At the 2025 Golden Globes on Jan. 5, trans actress Karla Sofía Gascón delivered a powerful acceptance speech as "Emilia Pérez" won best musical/comedy. "The light always wins over darkness," she told the crowd. "You can maybe put us in jail, you can beat us up, but you never can take away our soul, our existence, our identity." Her voice shaking with emotion, she concluded, "Raise your voice. I am who I am; know who you are."



Karla Sofía Gascón. Photo: Golden Globes

A MOTHER'S LOVE, A SON'S JOURNEY THE BIRTH OF STAND WITH TRANS

Executive Director Roz Keith told her son, Hunter: 'I just want you to be happy'

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

In 2013, being a transgender teenager often meant navigating a world of isolation, fear and closed doors. According to the Williams Institute, an estimated 300,000 youth ages 13-17 identify as transgender in the United States, yet a decade ago, medical care was scarce, support groups were rare and many families struggled alone in the darkness. When Hunter Keith came out as transgender at age 13 that year, his family's journey to find support would evolve into something much bigger: Stand with Trans, a nonprofit organization that has grown from a small local support group into a national lifeline for thousands of transgender and non-binary youth and their families.

When he came out, Hunter had already spent two years researching what it meant to be transgender. His mother, Roz Keith, found herself in unfamiliar territory, armed only with love and determination to help her child thrive.

"I had to Google the word transgender," Roz recalls. "I didn't know what gender identity disorder meant [a term that has evolved since 2013 to 'gender dysphoria']." But her immediate response to her son was one of unconditional love: "I just want you to be happy and healthy and safe and to be a productive member of society and to find love."

For Hunter, his preferred path ahead was clear. He knew what he needed when it came to gender-affirming care based on years of his own research, but the resources were nonexistent. "When I came out, this was before Caitlyn Jenner, before all this was really in social media and in the media at all really," Hunter says. "You would hear about an adult trans person on occasion, usually in the guise of nasty stereotypes."

The reality for most transgender kids looks nothing like those stereotypes. Hunter's journey, like so many others, includes moments that, in hindsight, made a great deal of sense years later. Roz recalls a poignant moment when he was 6 years old: "He was sitting in the bathtub playing and I was just sitting in the bathroom supervising. He looked up at me and said, 'I'm a boy.' And I said, 'OK.' I said, 'Do you want to be a boy?' And he said, 'No, but I am a boy.'"

Looking back, the signs were everywhere. When playing with dolls, Hunter insisted his baby doll be a boy and needed boy clothes.



Hunter and Roz Keith in the Keith family living room. Photo: Andrew Potter

His video game avatars were always male — Roz remembers watching him create buff, musclebound characters in *The Sims*. Even shopping trips revealed clues: At 3 or 4 years old, Hunter would gravitate to the boys' section, running his small fingers over tiny sweater vests and dress slacks, telling his mother, "When I have a baby, this is what I'm going to buy for them."

"He always felt like the weird kid, which is heartbreaking from a parent perspective," Roz says. "He just didn't have the language. He just felt different." They often read Todd Parr's "It's Okay to Be Different" together, not yet understanding its deeper relevance to Hunter's journey.

The pivotal moment came when 14-year-old Hunter asked for a haircut. Instead of sending photos of girls with short hair as Roz expected, he texted pictures of boys' haircuts. When she

questioned the masculine style, Hunter simply said "Yep" and walked away. Roz followed him upstairs for an explanation, and that's when everything changed: "Mom, I'm transgender. I'm a boy. I've done my research," Hunter told her, rattling off a list of needs from therapy to testosterone to surgery, information gathered from his years of online research.

Research from the Williams Institute shows that transgender youth with supportive families have significantly better mental health outcomes than those without such support. Yet a decade ago, finding that support was challenging. "I was definitely the only openly trans kid that I knew for a while," Hunter says. "Not having a support network of people my age or even a little bit older [so] that I could see I have a future was really hard. I think a lot of people take for granted when they see themselves represented in the media and when

they see themselves represented even in the people around them."

Finding medical care proved nearly impossible in Michigan. "There was not anything in Metro Detroit for him and for us," Roz says. "It was one call after another and every call ended with 'no, sorry, we can't help you.'" The family ultimately traveled to Boston to find a doctor willing to see a transgender patient under 18 — one of only a handful of such clinics in the entire country at the time.

The breakthrough came when the Keiths shared their story through local media. What began as one family's journey suddenly illuminated an invisible community desperate for connection and support.

"When we started Stand with Trans, it started as a group called Ally Parents," Hunter explains. "There had been a wave of youth suicides. We kind of realized that not all

parents were like mine.”

By February 2015, Stand with Trans had officially become a nonprofit organization. Their first community education event drew an overwhelming response. “We were expecting maybe 25, 30 people showing up,” Hunter recalls. “It was a full house. We ran out of flyers. We ran out of pamphlets that we had made. That was the wake-up call that, OK, this is definitely a needed nonprofit.”

In the decade since, Roz has been recognized for her advocacy work, appearing on local Michigan news outlets and contributing to discussions about transgender rights and healthcare access. In October, she appeared on “CBS Mornings” to discuss gender-affirming care and Stand with Trans in the wake of anti-LGBTQ+ legislative efforts ahead of the 2024 election. Hunter’s dad, Richard, serves as a board member. In his bio, he says his journey with Hunter has been a “learning experience, and like any worthwhile learning experience, it forces us to grow, both in knowledge and love, as well as in our willingness to look beyond our bias and preconceived notions.”

Today, Stand with Trans has evolved far beyond those early support groups, including hosting an annual conference called Trans Empowerment Month that brings together transgender youth, families and allies. The 2024 theme was Beyond the Binary. The organization also offers comprehensive virtual and in-person programming, reaching families nationwide. Their Lifeline Library, a digital repository of vetted information, has become particularly crucial as legislation targeting transgender

youth sweeps across multiple states.

“We want the Stand with Trans website to be the destination for credible information,” Roz says. “There is so much disinformation out there. It’s really important to us to make sure that our content is vetted, that our sources are credible.”

According to the Williams Institute, transgender youth face disproportionate




Roz and Hunter Keith. Photo: Andrew Potter

rates of anxiety, depression and suicide risk compared to their cisgender peers. A bright light in the research is that access to gender-affirming care and support significantly improves mental health outcomes. The Lifeline Library addresses these needs with resources ranging from crisis intervention to college planning, healthcare access guides to an extensive reading list for families beginning

See **Stand with Trans**, page 26

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◀ Affirmations

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lives of our young queer people, our queer seniors, our trans community. It's too important to the community, and not just in Southeast Michigan, but the whole state and really the region."

Garcia still remembers his first time visiting the center. In the bathroom, he encountered a transgender person putting on makeup in the mirror; they were changing their clothes. "I just started talking to them and they started crying, saying that coming to the transgender support group was the only time they were able to be themselves," he recalls. "They had a job that wouldn't accept it and so they came to Affirmations for the trans support lifeline where they could be who they are. I heard stories like that all the time."

Affirmations today

These days, Affirmations is bringing the community together in new ways, through collaborations with various local organizations that provide outreach, entertainment and social activities. "I think each executive has tried to make sure that it really is a space for the community, led by the community, and we're so lucky that we have this beautiful building that is paid off, that we own — that's an important piece," Garcia says. "I remember paying off the mortgage during my first time at Affirmations and how important that was that this building belongs to the community. It really is a treasure for the queer community in the state of Michigan."

Current Executive Director Cheryl Czach's vision for the center goes beyond physical boundaries. "One of the things I talk a lot about with staff is what it means to be a community center," she explains. "Are we talking about what happens within these walls, or are we talking about our community as a whole? For me, it's the latter."

Garcia says the community center is where people gather in times of joy, like when the Supreme Court marriage decision came down — or in times of sorrow after tragedies like the Pulse nightclub shooting. "It's there for the times when we need to be

together, for all kinds of reasons," he says. "Often, Affirmations is the first place people think to gather, and that's very special."

This philosophy translates into a comprehensive approach to support. On any given day, the center hosts a diverse

Cate Spinney, Affirmations' director of health and human services, notes that the community's needs are complex. "Common needs that present within the community often stem from ongoing experiences of minority stress," she notes. These include

across the state or collaborating with local organizations." MiGen now operates Michigan's first LGBTQ+ elders community center within the Affirmations building, while the Ringwald turns the community room into a black box theater several times



1998 Affirmations Prom attendees. BTL archive photo

"Before us, honestly, there was nothing. I'd like to think that Affirmations played a part in helping to change the atmosphere in Detroit, to expand the opportunities and the rights of LGBT people in Michigan from that humble start. And we did it by ourselves, for ourselves."

— Affirmations' first executive director, Jan Stevenson

array of visitors, from those seeking critical resources like shelter or food assistance to individuals exploring support groups, accessing mental health services or simply finding a welcoming workspace.

One of the center's most significant recent developments has been its mental health services expansion. What began in 2011 with a few social work interns has transformed into a robust program featuring five full-time licensed therapists, including two dedicated to telehealth services throughout Michigan.

trauma, depression, anxiety, substance use and gender dysphoria.

Spinney emphasizes that clients range from those seeking short-term counseling to individuals requiring long-term therapeutic relationships. "Oftentimes, complex trauma takes longer to process and heal from," she notes. "We have community members who have been receiving therapeutic services with us for several years."

A recent \$300,000 federal community project will allow Affirmations to convert a game room into four dedicated therapy suites, increasing community access to specialized care. The center offers both individual and group therapy, with plans to expand group therapy options in 2025.

Partnerships and volunteers: key to Affirmations' longevity

Partnerships have become a cornerstone of Affirmations' approach. Collaborations with MiGen and the Ringwald Theatre have transformed the center into a dynamic community hub. "We're always looking for ways to support the LGBTQ+ community in Michigan," Czach says. "Whether that's partnering with other community centers

a year when it puts on theater productions like "The E(xmas)icist," a recent Christmas-themed romp written by the theater's own Vince Kelley.

The center's impact is perhaps best illustrated through individual stories. Demetrike Wells-O'Brien, a board co-chair, initially participated in Affirmations' youth programming and has now returned to support the next generation. Wells-O'Brien first turned to Affirmations as a 16-year-old, a decision that he says helped him connect with invaluable resources, form lasting friendships and, most importantly, to gather the courage to embrace his authentic self.

"At the time, I felt compelled to conceal my true identity at school and within my family due to fears of ridicule and rejection," he recalls. At Affirmations, where he frequently attended Friday Night Drop-In events, "the weight of societal expectations was momentarily lifted." In time, he says, he was able to embark on the path that has shaped him into who he is today.

In 2018, responding to feelings of frustration and powerlessness in a tumultuous sociopolitical climate, Wells-O'Brien, who is a State Farm agency owner, returned to Affirmations as a volunteer on projects like the center's work with Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and joined the

The Straight Pop Star Who Made Space for My Queer Identity

While Robbie Williams is not gay, he notes that many of his musical influences have been



Robbie Williams in "Better Man." Photo: Paramount Pictures

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

I had already agreed to an interview with Robbie Williams before realizing he wasn't queer at all. That's on me. As a teenager who was fond of his anthemic ballad "Angel" and then saw him strip down to his briefs (and much less) in the "Rock DJ" video, I couldn't help but hope he was.

Our pop idols have limited control over how we perceive

them and their sexual identity (just ask Shawn Mendes, Harry Styles and even Taylor Swift), and in my wishful thinking as a gay kid growing up in the 1990s without much representation, I missed the part where Williams sued a British tabloid in 2005 for claiming he had a "secret gay lover" and performed a sex act on a man in a Manchester club bathroom. (The tabloid ultimately apologized and paid "substantial"

damages to the pop star.)

Then I lost track of him for a while. Now, he's the subject of an entire biopic, "Better Man," where he's portrayed by a CGI chimpanzee. Though human actors surround him in "The Greatest Showman" director Michael Gracey's film, this animal version of Williams serves as a symbol of his complex feelings about fame, as he contemplates how he sees himself in a world that often dictates the

roles we're supposed to play. For a time, Williams became something he wasn't for me.

Our idols can only control their narrative to a certain extent, and when I finally connected with him during our video call and realized only hours before while researching that he is, in fact, completely straight, I learned that Williams is the kind of guy who, even if he wasn't the representation I once hoped for as a struggling gay teen,

would be proud to have your back.

"Look, if I fancied noshing some bloke off by the canal, I'd have noshed some bloke off by the canal," he tells me, in response to my ask about the lawsuit, which he said he appreciated having the opportunity to respond to. "The visual of that, I am perfectly OK with; it was important for me to be me at the

See **Robbie Williams**, page 22



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Resistance Through Repair

How these queer Detroit Repair Cafe volunteers are building bridges with skill-sharing and solidarity

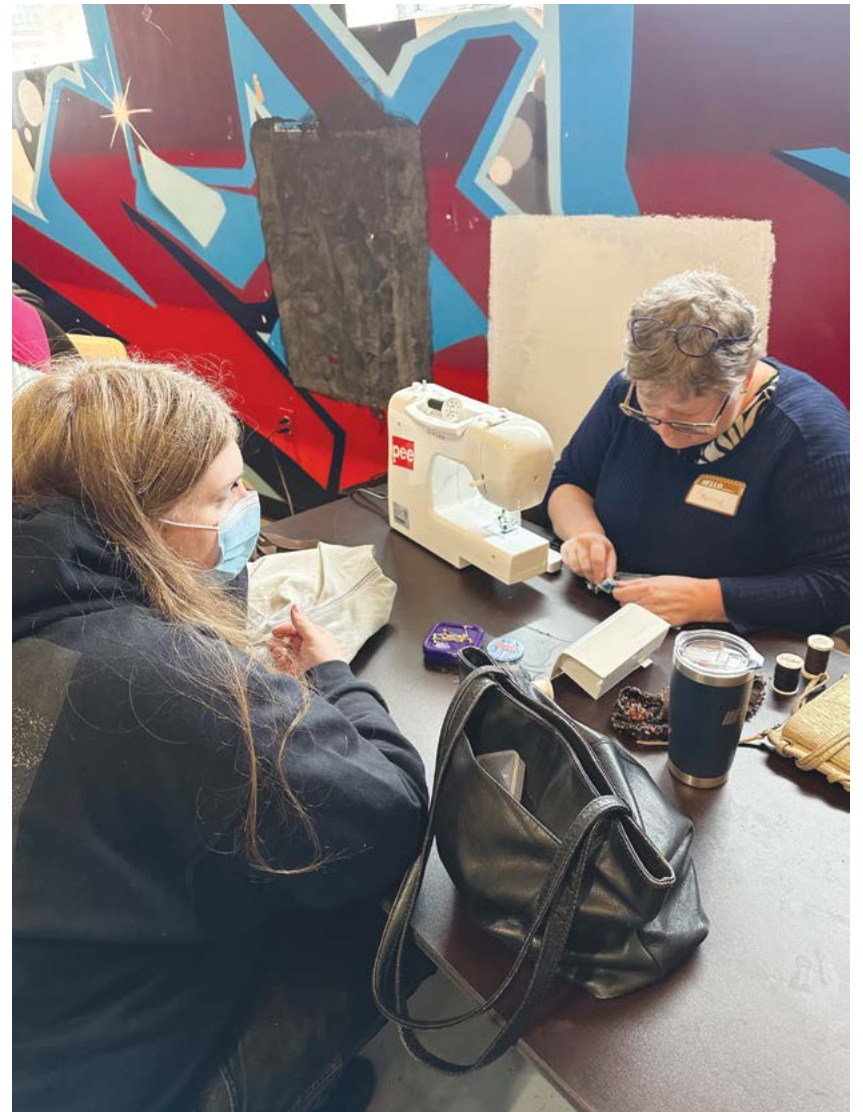
BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

In the heart of Detroit, a revolutionary community project is transforming disposable culture into a powerful act of radical care. Founded by Diana Graham, a 25-year-old industrial engineer and stand-up comedian, the Detroit-Waawiyatanong Repair Cafe is more than just a monthly repair clinic — it's a testament to connection, resilience and collective healing. Inspired by an international movement that began in the Netherlands, the cafe operates on a simple yet profound premise: Bring in your broken items, and a team of skilled volunteers will help you fix them, free of charge.

But this isn't just about salvaging a coffee maker or mending a pair of pants (one of the most commonly requested services). By reclaiming the art of repair, Graham, who uses he/they pronouns, and his team are reimagining our relationship with technology, possessions and each other. The cafe's very name is a statement of solidarity, with "Waawiyatanong" honoring the indigenous name for the Detroit area. In a world that often feels fragmented and disposable, the Repair Cafe offers an alternative model of patience, skill-sharing and mutual support — a queer-inclusive approach to community that values every object, and every person, as worthy of care, attention and restoration.

Jojo Glugla, who works alongside Graham from an operational angle, tells BTL that the Repair Cafe isn't only about fixing people's stuff for free. "It's also a community space where anyone can come in to hang out, work on their own projects with the tools we provide or ask for help or guidance," he explains. "But most importantly, where people can make friends with like-minded individuals who are open to helping others as well as being helped."

Though he is an experienced community volunteer and advocate, Graham says spearheading the Detroit Repair Cafe project has been a surprising endeavor in some ways. "I'm very passionate about mutual aid, and as an engineer, I'm pretty good at fixing things, but with most mutual aids I've been involved with, I haven't felt I could take on a leadership role or really bring something to the table," he explains. "But



A repair station at a Detroit Repair Cafe clinic. Courtesy photo

with the repair cafe, I was like, 'I can absolutely do this. I know how to do this. I want to do this.' It's really cool to finally have an outlet where I felt like I could really give back to my community."

The cafe, which meets monthly at the ArtBlock community space on Holden Street in Detroit, isn't just about technical skills. It's a deliberate exercise in community building, education and resistance against what Graham calls "planned obsolescence" — the corporate strategy of designing products to fail.

"When companies make things like Keurigs or printers really cheap, but the replacements are expensive, they want you to just buy a new product," Graham says. "If we can fix the thing they designed to break, then we can kind of get ahead of

that and not let them win."

Volunteer Carline Kneebone says the clinic has brought to light the impact individuals can have in the community. "Through the mutual aid of helping others fix their everyday objects, we're able to build connections and empower those around us," they say. "I've had a wonderful time working with the people of Detroit and I'm excited to see what it brings in the future."

The repair process is intentionally collaborative. Volunteers set up their repair stations with chairs on both sides of the table, actively teaching participants how to fix their own items. Whether it's a vintage cassette radio, a sewing machine or a pair of well-loved pants, each repair is an opportunity for learning and

connection.

Graham, who is queer and neurodivergent, has deliberately created an inclusive space. Most of the volunteers are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and the cafe prioritizes accessibility. They encourage (but don't require) mask-wearing. They also filter the air. Their end goal is to create an environment welcoming to immunocompromised individuals and people with disabilities.

"We're intentionally inclusive of queer identities and disabilities," Graham notes. "But we also want to be inclusive without compromising our values. We don't want to appear unapproachable."

Volunteer Lexi Meade says the experience of helping at the repair clinics has added enrichment to her life. "I've always been passionate about community service, but the cafe takes it a step further by allowing me to meet incredible people, both volunteers and those looking to repair their items," she says. "It also helps me hone my own mechanical skills to help reduce waste and return an item in working order to their owner. It is one of the most fulfilling opportunities I have had to serve my community, and I can't wait to see how it grows and impacts more people."

The cafe has grown quickly, with about 60 volunteers signed up for the program and around 10 on hand for each monthly event. They've recently expanded their hours to make the service more accessible, running from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Graham says he's seen a wide range of items come through the door for repair in Detroit and in Nebraska, where he first joined up with the Repair Cafe movement. "There, lamps were a big thing, but not so much in Detroit," he notes. Among

the repairs he's seen are things like a camping grill that just needed a good cleaning, sewing machines, jewelry in need of repair, and all kinds of small appliances. Graham's team can tackle just about anything. "It's just a matter of



Diana Graham. Courtesy photo

having the confidence and the tools to take something apart and knowing that you can put it back together," he says. "It's the team-building aspect that ends up making the difference when we're doing a repair cafe. We have talented people who can sew, repair jewelry or just help people with little things like finding a replacement cord for something." Worldwide, coffee makers top the list of the most commonly repaired items, followed by vacuums and pants.

Hannah Graff, a volunteer who often runs the front desk and sometimes offers her seamstress services for clothing repairs and alterations, says the project combines two things she feels passionate about: reducing consumption and waste and creating community. "Although we

are not an explicitly queer group, it is made very clear that this is a safe and welcome place for all queer people," she adds. "It's been amazing seeing people of all backgrounds come in just looking for a simple repair but staying the whole time just because they are getting on so well, talking and learning from the volunteers."

Graff says visitors often leave feedback about having positive experiences with the cafe volunteers — an aspect she thinks can have a wider impact. "I think it is really important right now for people outside of the queer community to meet and interact positively with us," she explains. "Certain politicians and media groups want to turn queer people into something to, at best, 'other,' and at worst, fear. But by creating community spaces like this, we are able to show people that not only is that untrue, but we are actually quite nice and normal — we might just dress a bit better!"

Graham has been gratified by the positive response to the monthly clinics. "Every time I post a new flyer and people share it, we get more people showing up," he says. "And we always get more volunteers — people always want to help. That's been really awesome."

In a city known for resilience and creativity, the Detroit-Waawiyamong Repair Cafe represents something profound: the radical notion that, together, we can fix what's broken.

In 2025, Detroit Repair Cafe will take place at ArtBlock (1411 Holden St., Detroit) on the first Sunday of the month from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Follow Detroit-Waawiyamong Repair Cafe on Instagram @detroitrepaircafe to learn more.

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Video Threesome Puzzle Solution
Puzzle can be found on page 25

time. Just like it's important for you to be you in every aspect and to be seen and to be heard."

"I'm not disrespecting anybody or getting my handbag and going, 'Heaven forbid that people think of this disgusting thing [about] me,'" he continues. If someone were to create an AI-imagined version of Williams engaged in a same-sex encounter (his exact words: "AI me doing it"), "I'll watch it myself," he says.

Williams' honesty extends into "Better Man," where we see a version of him that's raw and vulnerable. It's a portrayal grounded in his truth, not ours — or mine.

The film delves into the psychological toll of his fame and his constant struggle to escape the shadow of his father, Pete Conway, a beloved entertainer in the U.K. It's a reminder that, for all his charisma, Williams is still just a man who grew up in a working-class town, trying to navigate a life that skyrocketed him to stardom in 1990 at just 16 years old, as the youngest member of the British boy band that would eventually become known as Take That. The film captures the group's meteoric rise to fame, particularly within queer spaces. Williams recalls, "For the first 18 months, all we played were gay clubs."

Williams quickly formed a deep connection with the queer community. When I ask him about his memories of performing at gay clubs while preparing for those scenes in "Better Man," his laugh prompts me to delve further.

"OK, the laugh's about this: It's my first memory of being in a gay club when I'm 16," he starts, amused by what he's about to say but also acknowledging uncertainty about telling a story that "may not land."

"I'm sat in a banquette in this part of the club where a curtain is pulled in front of it and it's a makeshift dressing room. And I am sat by myself and there's a man in the corner and he appears to be masturbating. And I'm like, 'Oh my god. What?' And I'm sort of frozen and I'm thinking, 'But what do I do in this? I'm cool. Just be cool.'" And it turns out it was a stripper and he was blowing his penis up for his performance. He wasn't masturbating at all. And so that was sort of a memory flashback that I got."

The film stops short of exploring that memory. Biographical movies, of course, often face limitations in delving into deeply personal stories. Williams offers "many different reasons" for this restraint.

"Lots of them being that a lot of people are still alive and will sue me and I can't prove it in a court of law that it actually happened," he says.

But Williams' childhood in Stoke-on-Trent, a city in Staffordshire, England, gets plenty of attention. He tells me it's "considered the hood in modern parlance or thereabouts," and recalls that "gay" was a slur and something to be feared and ridiculed."

Life took a dramatic turn for him at 15, after his audition led him to Take That. Soon thereafter, he found himself being admired by half-naked gay men in clubs, a stark contrast that he vividly described as transformative: "I went from being in a place where I used to wonder which shoes to put on by how much violence was going to be at the place that I was going to — steel toe cap boots if it was going to be really bad — and then, all of a sudden, I was in this place of acceptance and warmth and silliness."

It's a place that Williams, who is now 50, is familiar with, and since his teen rise, he has come to understand his place in gay culture even, as he says, "I don't understand the queer lifestyle, I'm not of it."

"But," he goes on, "I understand that I am accepted there and I'm loved and I'm wanted and I am needed. And from that moment on I know what my response to and of it is, which is gratitude."

From an early age, Williams says he latched onto the queer community's sense of playfulness and lightheartedness. "I have been mainly inspired by Black culture and gay culture," he says. "And they are two things that I am incredibly grateful for to this day."

"As British people, we're camp. We put on dresses. We go to these theater shows where women play guys and guys play women. And the people that are on the TV as you're growing up are camp and are warm and silly. I'll go back to that word 'silly' that means so much to me: I take silly very seriously," he says.

He speaks highly of the "warmth of people" like Larry Grayson, a popular British comedian and TV presenter who was rumored to be gay, but only hinted at it toward the end of his life. "No one had a clue that he was gay, but it's just so

obvious now," Williams says.

"And Freddie Mercury, who is an angel, and every time I see him represented on screen and in documentaries I just am gobsmacked of his very presence and his very being," he adds. "And then, of course, you've got Elton. Boy George changed the world with one appearance on 'Top of the Pops,' which is our TV show. So you are surrounded and also influenced and informed — well, I was anyway, of how to act, how to behave, and how to be gentle and warm and arch."

During our interview, it became clear that Williams holds a deep respect for the LGBTQ+ community, offering insights that go beyond surface-level understanding. His connection to the queer community extends beyond performing at gay clubs; he actively seeks to understand the people who've been following him for decades.

"I suppose that there is a certain set of self-examination that has to be done because it's forced upon you, that people in the straight community aren't forced to do," he says. "So I'm sure that that self-examination elevates you to a place that people wouldn't normally have to have had done because you are forced to. There's an elevation in thought because of the process that you've had to go through."

He likens his journey of being understood by the public to mine, as a gay man, and says that discrediting the rumors surrounding him stem from his desire for his true self to be represented accurately and authentically. "I am bothered about being authentic, and so are you. You are bothered about being authentically you in a world that has told you you can't be you. The world was telling me I couldn't be me. And it was really important for me to say, 'No, I'm going to be me and I'm going to be me 100%.'"

In 2013, the rumors he debunked were met with a quote from Williams, as expressed to The Daily Star, that acknowledged that he was "49 percent homosexual," a remark that led The Guardian to criticize his reliance on stereotypes.

"I love musical theater and a lot of the other things that are often associated with gays. I am 49 percent homosexual and sometimes as far as 50 percent. However, that would imply that I enjoy having a particular sort of fun, which I don't," he said at the time.

And recently, while speaking to journalist Michael Cragg at The Guardian, Williams explained his reasoning for challenging the gay rumors made by a British tabloid via a lawsuit: "I was more sad. Not about gay accusations because, look, I've done everything but suck a cock. Honestly, you've never met somebody that wants to be gay as much as me."

a newspaper about how I sucked some bloke's dick by a canal. And now the only thing about that was I'd gone to great pains to tell everybody who I was, and here was this story saying I'm actually not telling people who I am and what I was. And that, not the fact that I'm by a canal on my knees, nosing off some bloke, I'm not bothered; the thing that pained me was, yet



"I was maligned, belittled, disrespected, hated, followed, harangued, phone-tapped," he shares with me about his experiences with the British tabloids. "People on the payroll being told to give rumors about me, tell them where I was, people who were in the credit card companies. And my only way of representing myself at the time was to do a book, and the book would say everything about who I was. So I released this book as a way of going, 'If you hate me, at least hate me for the right reasons.'"

"The same week that comes out," he continues, "there's a story in

again, I'm telling my truth and I'm exposing myself so much, but there's this thing representing me that isn't true."

However Williams chooses to identify, it's clear he might not have been the man I thought he was when I was a teenager desperate for queer representation, but he is, at least, the first to admit that the truth, messy and imperfect as it may be, is the only thing that matters. And in a world that often demands we fit into predefined boxes, his journey is a reminder that we're all just trying to be seen for who we truly are — no matter who that is.



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Trans Lucent

Continued from page 11

came away with a newly found desire to join the crossdressers there and became a regular at the club.

In time, Law dropped her "dead" first name and legally changed it to Janet. She also had top surgery, but not bottom. When questioned why by a reporter for Deadline Detroit, she replied, "Gender is between the ears, not between the legs."

Eventually, she converted a portion of her machine shop to a store selling clothing for crossdressers. No such store existed in the Detroit area in the early 1990s, and few anywhere else.

It was an admittedly odd configuration: one side selling car parts and smelling of grease, the other selling women's dresses and stiletto heels. Strange bedfellows, to be sure. Imagine the looks on the faces of the Downriver gearheads who accidentally wandered over to the crossdresser's side.

Law sought to expand her operation by converting 1,200 feet of the building into a nightclub catering to a transgender and crossdresser clientele. The city zoning board refused her proposal, citing the lack of spaces.

Eventually, Law closed the machine shop side. Nowadays, she is semi-retired, and the store is run by Lexi Law, who took Janet's last name in honor of her.

I knew none of this history when I made my first trip to Janet's Closet. Upon entering the store, I had to first get past my kid-in-a-candy-store fascination. So much to choose from! Where do I start?

It is a traumatic experience when going shopping as a transgender person. So, I was apprehensive when I was met by one of the young women on staff. I explained my desire to buy a dress and a wig. Without batting an eye, she took me around and patiently helped me determine the right dress size and find the most flattering wig. No sign of critical judgment, not a smirk, nor a snide comment. Just business as usual for her, putting me at ease immediately.

"I am thrilled to hear that our staff makes you feel this way," Lexi told me. "That is what we strive for. We hope to provide a safe, inclusive environment for our customers."

Lexi has worked at the store since 2012. In Janet's absence, she now handles day-to-day operations. Along with bookkeeping and inventory ordering, Lexi also maintains the store's website, which represents a far bigger part of its business nowadays.

Our business [is] mostly online; I would estimate up to 75% at times," said Lexi. "Over the past few years though, it seems we have

had an increase in store traffic. I think adding our Janet's Dungeon section in the store has attributed to that traffic increase overall."

Janet's Closet offers designs that work well for transgender women in sizes XS to 4X, including shirts, dresses, skirts, panties and corsets designed by the store as well as brands like Leg Avenue, Dreamgirl, Coquette and



Janet's Closet today (bottom) and the building when it served as a drag race auto machine shop (top). Courtesy photo

more. Shoppers can find hosiery, lingerie and clothing in regular and plus sizes. Most items include waist and chest measurements. Store-designed items offer options like a little extra room in the chest and longer lengths, Lexi explains.

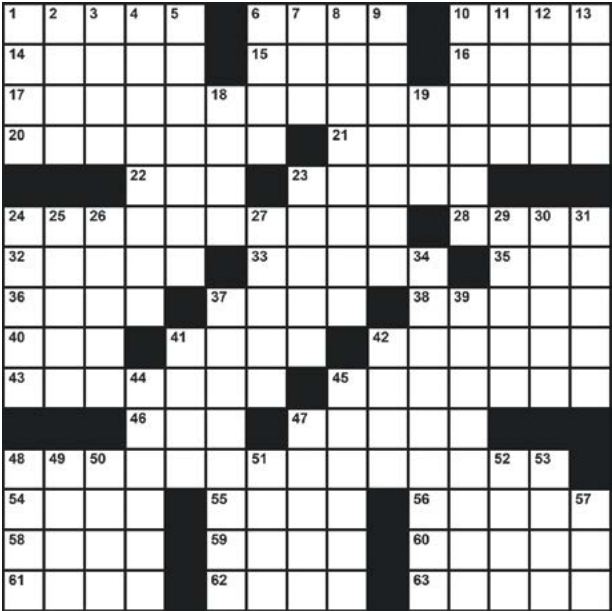
"As a general rule," Lexi advised, "women's clothing will be 1 to 2 sizes up from a men's size. If you wear a men's large T-shirt, you will likely be in the XL or 1X, maybe 2X range in women's depending on the style."

Shoes can pose an additional size challenge. It is virtually impossible to find a women's shoe outlet that sells shoes in sizes larger than a women's 12. One brand that does offer extended women's sizes is Pleaser. Their sexy styles are generally worn by strippers and pole dancers, but they come in larger sizes and their use by drag queens introduced them to the trans community. Luckily, Janet's carries Pleaser shoes in-store. I bought a pair there myself.

The store has become a Mecca for transgender people throughout the United States. I have made the trip to Janet's Closet several times now. They fitted me for my first corset and bra, and on one occasion, I even treated myself to one of the makeovers they offer. While most of the drivers speeding down Fort Street probably wonder what goes on behind Janet's gaudy purple exterior, chances are they would never appreciate the affirmation to be found there for a transgender person.

Open Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. and Saturday, 12-6 p.m. Janet's Closet is located at 2317 Fort Street in Wyandotte. Visit janetscloset.com to shop online.

Anni Arbour is an award-winning, bestselling author and journalist. Based in Ann Arbor, Anni attended both Eastern Michigan University and the University of Michigan. She is a member of the Trans Journalist Association. Anni's monthly Trans Lucent column shines light on wide-ranging transgender topics and individuals.



Video
Threesome
Across

- 1 Money substitute
- 6 WNBA honors
- 10 Sexually unrestrained
- 14 Like a Liberace doll
- 15 Coll. with a bear mascot
- 16 Comics canine
- 17 Series set in the days of McCarthyism with 48-Across

- 20 Worry at the Y?
- 21 "Gone With the Wind" extras
- 22 Refusal of Rimbaud
- 23 Endora portrayer
- 24 Historical romance television series with 48-Across
- 28 Tasty tubers
- 32 Goes lickety split
- 33 Loads
- 35 Like a one-incher, in Dogpatch
- 36 River of Hirschfeld's country
- 37 ____ about (roughly)
- 38 Make erect

- 40 Caesar's three
- 41 Biathlete's slats
- 42 2024 fantasy film with 48-Across
- 43 Relief on a penny
- 45 Cavalrymen who stick it in you
- 46 Long, in Hawaii
- 47 Big tech stock
- 48 He played in the three projects in the puzzle simultaneously
- 54 Anti-oxidant berry
- 55 Lysol target
- 56 Reacts to the MAGA agenda, perhaps
- 58 Spin like a top
- 59 ____ Hari
- 60 Some tennis scores for Mauresmo
- 61 Foot fetish main dish?
- 62 First mate's pair
- 63 Rock-bottom

Down

- 1 Nos. for South Beach sunbathers
- 2 Scotland Yard discovery
- 3 Exercise authority like a queen
- 4 Mead, while living in Samoa
- 5 Shooters without ammo
- 6 "Heinz 57 varieties" dog
- 7 Remote target
- 8 Broadway fan
- 9 Grassy plain in "The Lion King"
- 10 Like Gomer Pyle

- 11 Presbyterian activist Michael
- 12 k.d. lang record label
- 13 Lass in a Hardy tale
- 18 Corkmaster's concern, in a "Frasier" episode
- 19 Uey from WSW
- 23 Member of a Dumas three-some
- 24 Swelter in the sun
- 25 Spokes of dykes on bikes, e.g.
- 26 Leave stranded on a gay ski weekend, say
- 27 Took to the police station
- 29 Quite similar
- 30 Moliere comedy, with "The"
- 31 You ride them during gay ski weekends
- 34 Headmaster
- 37 "I Cain't Say No" musical
- 39 Four-star review for "Rent," e.g.
- 41 "Chim-Chim-Cheree" residue
- 42 Cary Grant's "I ____ Male War Bride"
- 44 Danes on the screen
- 45 Many October babies
- 47 One hundred smackers
- 48 Shark flick
- 49 Kahlo's eight
- 50 Polished surface, for a drag queen
- 51 Every 24 hours
- 52 Kazan, whose desire was a streetcar
- 53 Deep desires
- 57 Grounded fast flier

See p. 21 for answers



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Q. MENSER

Stand with Trans

Continued from page 15

their journey.

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly expanded the organization's reach. "We had to figure out how to do the work when we couldn't be in person," Roz explains. "It was either do the work or shut down. So we figured it out, and that's why our online resources are so important to us, because we know we are reaching people all over the place."

Virtual support groups now connect transgender youth and their families across the country, breaking down the isolation that Hunter once felt so acutely. Funded by the Hope Fund, the organization is expanding its Southeast Michigan resource section to include everything from medical care providers to transgender-friendly businesses. This comprehensive approach reflects a deep understanding of the challenges families face.

Hunter, now a successful retail manager, emphasizes the importance of supporting both youth and their families through transition. "Something that is said pretty commonly in the community is that your kid may have had seven years to come to terms with what they want to do and what they want to see in their future, and the parent has about seven minutes to process before the kids want to get things rolling," he says. "That's something that I think our

organization has done a very, very good job of — just letting parents take a breath and recognize that there is a process to this. It's not as overwhelming as it might seem in those seven minutes."

As political headwinds threaten transgender rights in many states, Stand with Trans has joined forces with other Michigan LGBTQ+ organizations to provide expanded crisis resources and support. "Part of the reason that we come together as a coalition, as a network, is because we know collectively our voices are stronger," Roz explains. "We can go to elected officials with requests that are more powerful when we say it's coming from this entire community."

That scared, isolated teenager who once had to travel to Boston for care is now a confident adult, living proof that with support and understanding, transgender youth can thrive. "For me, the only thing that I was seeing as a young teen was death rates of trans adults," Hunter recalls. "Now, we can lead normal lives. We can just be ourselves."

As Stand with Trans enters its second decade, Roz remains focused on the organization's vital mission. "What I think is really important to talk about is how the care is lifesaving," she says. "This isn't just getting braces on a kid. This is lifesaving care."

For more information about Stand with Trans and to access the Lifeline Library, visit standwithtrans.org.



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(The Guardian, London)

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